

# Facilitation Resources

6

Volume 6.  
Dealing with Group Conflict

IN PARTNERSHIP ...

**Hubert H. Humphrey  
Institute of Public Affairs**  
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## Introduction to Facilitation Resources

During the 1990s there has been a renewed interest in citizen involvement in community decisions. While many issues are still decided by powerful and financially strong networks, the ability of the average citizen to collect relevant information, address issues with intelligence, and initiate public meetings has made the public influence greater.

Those who work with organizations have learned the need for effective facilitation skills. In the Foreword to *Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision Making* by Sam Kaner, Michael Doyle presents two important lessons learned. "Lesson one: if people don't participate in and 'own' the solution to the problems or agree to the decision, implementation will be half-hearted at best, probably misunderstood, and, more likely than not, fail. The second lesson is that the key differentiating factor in the success of an organization is not just the products and services, not just its technology or market share, but the organization's ability to elicit, harness, and focus the vast intellectual capital and goodwill in their members, employees, and stakeholders. When these get energized and focused, the organization becomes a powerful force for positive change in today's business and societal environments."

*Facilitation Resources*, available as a set of eight volumes, is an effort to enhance volunteers' group facilitation techniques. The participants will be able to use the skills in facilitating nonprofit groups and organizations through important discussions vital to the organization and to the community.

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# Overview: Dealing with Group Conflict

Conflict in groups is a normal part of the group process. Disagreements and differing points of view have the potential to add important information, broaden the perspectives of the group, and serve as a positive contribution to the work. Although the outcome may be positive, there will be some stress and discomfort. Typically concerns and disagreements will arise in one of the following areas: 1) the process the group is using, 2) the content being discussed, or 3) the people (personalities) involved in the discussion.

## Facilitating Conflict-Habituated Situations

As a facilitator, your role is to help provide a safe environment where disagreement and conflict can surface and be put to use as a positive and creative force. Establishing ground rules and clarifying the expectations of the members at the beginning of the group process is one of the most important things a facilitator can do. It provides participants a clear sense of the boundaries of the group. Having group members acknowledge that disagreements should focus on the ideas being discussed, not on the people involved in the discussion, is an example of a ground rule that can be used in a group. Asking people to state as clearly as they can their understanding of the opposing viewpoint is another method that can help build understanding and communication within a group. In some cases, disagreements may become so intense that it is helpful to have group members take a break, cool off, and return to the conversation after some time for reflection. It is important that, as a facilitator, you develop a level of comfort and confidence in working and being in groups where conflict is occurring.

Some techniques for facilitating conflict-habituated situations will help to ensure the group moves forward. For example, understand that transforming conflict requires moving with or toward the adversary, not continuing the fight. The facilitator must have sensitivity to recognize how difficult it may be for people who have seen themselves as “enemies” to come into the same room and discuss an issue.

Techniques for leveling (letting the other know how you make sense to yourself) and listening (understanding how the other makes sense to him- or herself) are important tools for facilitators, especially in situations where conflict is accelerated. An example of leveling in a group is sharing your thoughts, feelings, hopes, concerns, or needs without expectation that the other should respond in a particular way. An example of listening is checking out your interpretation of body language: “I see that you have your arms folded. Sometimes this means that a person is feeling defensive. What are you feeling?”

# 6





### Conflict Framework

When a group is experiencing conflict it is useful for the facilitator to analyze the potential source of that conflict. A planning team of the entire group may also analyze the conflict. A conflict framework is useful to analyze the causes and potential interventions within a group. Conflicts may be about:

- Data (e.g., lack of information, misinformation, different interpretations of data)
- Relationships (e.g., misperceptions or stereotypes, repetitive negative behaviors)
- Interests (e.g., perceived or actual competitiveness, procedural interests)
- Values (e.g., different ways of life, ideology, and religion)
- Structural (e.g., unequal control, ownership, or distribution of resources)

Each of these areas of conflict can be resolved with facilitation interventions such as: agreeing on a process to collect and assess data; setting ground rules to block negative, repetitive behaviors; developing tradeoffs to satisfy the interests of different stakeholders; allowing parties to agree to disagree; and/or reallocating ownership or control of resources.

### Problem Meeting Behaviors

Facilitators can learn to recognize and handle common problem meeting behaviors. These behaviors may include the long-winded dominator, the side conversationalist, or the quiet participant. These behaviors are considered to be problems because they distract from the agenda and disrupt the attention of the group.

It can be helpful for a facilitator to think about why someone is expressing a problem meeting behavior. For example, the long-winded dominator may be overly prepared to speak on a point, or the quiet participant may be waiting to be asked to contribute. Understanding the “why” of behavior is helpful as a facilitator considers “what to do.”

Becoming comfortable with responses to negative group behaviors is an important skill of facilitators. For example, the facilitator may visit with the long-winded member during a break or after the meeting and ask the person to be more concise or to allow other members to speak.



# Facilitating Conflict-Habituated Situations

Facilitators are challenged when they work with groups that are conflict-habituated. This means that group conflict is not a short-term problem that needs solving, but is inherent in the group due to value differences.

## Assumptions

- Help get all parties to define their “real” interests.
- Create awareness of the possibility of a “better way” of handling differences.
- Seek to build relationships that are different from those that currently exist.
- Understand that transforming conflict requires moving with or toward the adversary, not continuing the fight.
- Realize that all parties need to join energies to seek a new solution.

## Facilitation Principles

- “Book-end” the event to serve the larger good. At the beginning, set the intention by stating the common good that is being sought by the group. At the end of the session, describe the benefit of the work by stating how the group has progressed toward the common good.
- Greet each person heart to heart. Invite everyone into full participation of the group work.
- Hold an unwaveringly positive view as the facilitator. See each person, each situation, as inherently perfect.
- Honor the truth of each person’s experience by allowing them time to share in the group. Value the uniqueness of each individual.
- Hold the space open for what needs to happen. Trust the emerging process and facilitate with creativity and flexibility.
- Feed the people from your full and loving attention. Connect from the heart and be fully present with this situation and group.

Source: Adapted with permission from Louise Diamond. *The Inner Work of Facilitation: Modeling Inner Peace*.



# Guidelines for Dialogue: Listening

## Understanding How the Other Makes Sense to Him- or Herself

1. Give the speaker your full and undivided attention.
2. Listen for the meaning, feelings, and values (how it makes sense, what are the emotions, what's important).
3. Use clarifying questions or statements. For example,
  - Are you saying that . . . ?
  - What do you mean by . . . ?
  - Let's see if I understand what you're saying.
  - It sounds like you're saying . . . Is that right?
4. Check out your assumptions
  - a) about interpretations of body language.
  - b) about what you imagine is the thought or belief behind the statement.
5. Ask open-ended questions to expand the communication. For example,
  - Could you say more about . . . ?
  - How might that look?
  - What would help that happen?
  - How do you make sense of that?
  - How do you feel about that?
6. Suspend or release your own reactions and judgments to be fully present to the other person.
  - a) Comments about "should" or "shouldn't," "right" or "wrong," "good" or "bad" impede the flow of further leveling.
  - b) Comments about what it reminds you of in your own life can also stop the sharing before it is complete.

Source: Adapted with permission from Louise Diamond, Institute for Multi-Track Diplomacy, 1997.



# Guidelines for Dialogue: Leveling

## Letting the Other Know How You Make Sense to Yourself

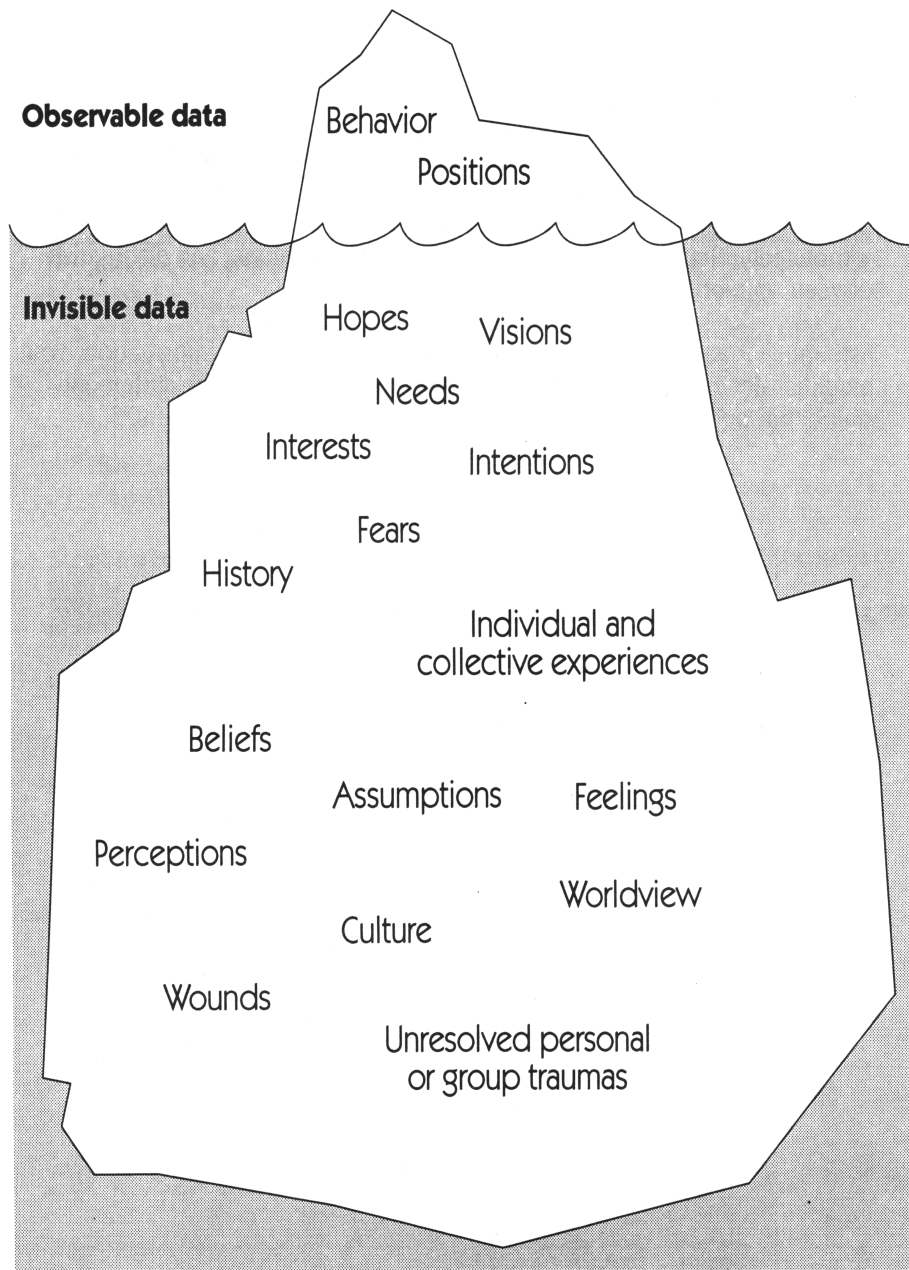
1. Speak the truth of your own experience.
  - a) Speak of what you know from your own life, not what you hear others say or what you believe others want you to say.
  - b) Share, at whatever level of risk you feel comfortable with, your thoughts, feelings, hopes, concerns, needs—without expectation that the other should respond in a particular way.
2. Speak for yourself.
  - a) In whatever language works for you culturally, differentiate when you are speaking as an individual (I) or as part of a collective (we).
  - b) If you speak collectively, allow room for the possibility that others in the group may have other opinions.
3. Acknowledge the assumptions that underlie your opinions, and distinguish between opinions and truth.
4. Distinguish loaded questions from questions that truly seek information. You can generally test for a loaded question by asking, “What is the statement behind that question, and what is the feeling behind that statement?”

Source: Adapted with permission from Louise Diamond, Institute for Multi-Track Diplomacy, 1997.



# The Iceberg Theory of Group Relations

Most groups in conflict-habituated systems engage each other around observable data—the outward behavior, the positions taken publicly. In fact, these are usually driven by the invisible phenomena—what’s under the surface of the iceberg. The work of the third party is to bring what’s hidden to the surface, so that it might be seen and understood, and dealt with directly.



# Conflict Framework

Conflict within and among groups of people is part of life. Since it cannot be avoided, leaders need to manage conflict constructively. The conflict framework developed by the Humphrey Institute Conflict and Change Center suggests several strategies for leaders. This framework is intended to be adjusted to the particular situation.

It has four basic steps:

**I. Be rooted in reality.**

Work to hear different realities of the same situation. Is this conflict about Data, Relationships, Interests, Values, or Structure? What are the causes of the conflict?

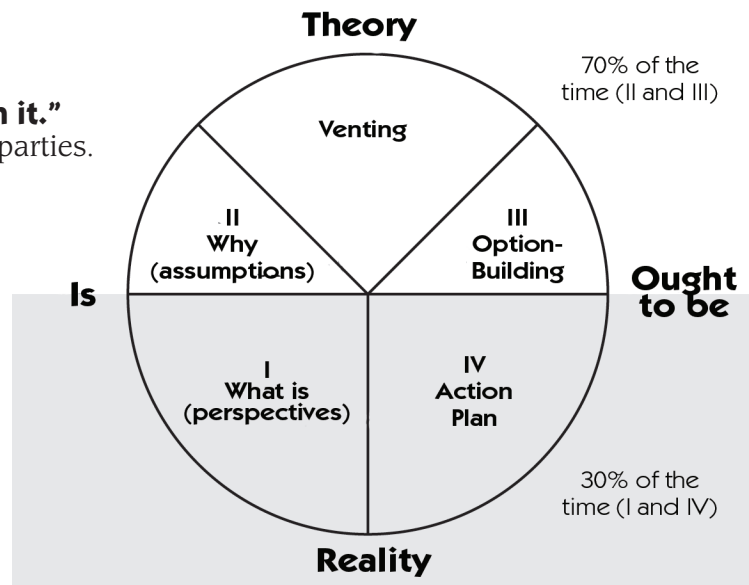
**II. Examine underlying assumptions.**

Allow people to express their feelings (venting).

**III. Create options.**

**IV. Produce action to “get on with it.”**

This involves responsibility of all parties.



**Readings that may be of interest:**

Fisher, Roger, and Scott Brown. 1988. *Getting Together: Building a Relationship That Gets to Yes*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Fisher, Roger, and William Ury. 1981. *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement without Giving In*. New York: Penguin.

Rusk, Tom, with Patrick Miller. 1993. *The Power of Ethical Persuasion*. New York: Viking.

“It always takes a group of people working together with a common purpose in an atmosphere of trust and collaboration to get extraordinary things done.”

-James Kouzes and Barry Posner, US leadership consultants



### Conflict Framework: Causes and Interventions (Step 1)

#### **DATA conflicts are caused by:**

- Lack of information
- Misinformation
- Different views on what is relevant
- Different interpretations of data
- Different assessment procedures

#### **Possible DATA interventions:**

- Reach an agreement on what data are important
- Agree on process to collect data
- Develop common criteria to assess data
- Use third-party experts to gain outside opinion or break deadlocks

#### **RELATIONSHIP conflicts are caused by:**

- Strong emotions
- Misperceptions or stereotypes
- Poor communication or miscommunication
- Repetitive negative behavior

#### **Possible RELATIONSHIP interventions:**

- Control expression of emotions through procedure, ground rules, caucuses, and so forth
- Promote expression of emotions by legitimizing feelings and providing a process
- Clarify and build positive perceptions
- Improve quality and quantity of communication
- Block negative repetitive behavior by changing structure
- Encourage positive problem-solving attitudes

#### **INTEREST conflicts are caused by:**

- Perceived or actual competitiveness
- Substantive (content) interests
- Procedural interests
- Psychological interests

#### **Possible INTEREST-BASED interventions:**

- Focus on interests, not positions
- Look for objective criteria
- Develop integrative solutions that address needs of all parties
- Search for ways to expand options or resources
- Develop tradeoffs to satisfy interests of different strengths

#### **VALUE conflicts are caused by:**

- Different criteria for evaluating ideas or behaviors
- Exclusive intrinsically valuable goals
- Different ways of life, ideology, and religion

#### **Possible VALUE-RELATED interventions:**

- Avoid defining problem in terms of value
- Allow parties to agree to disagree
- Create spheres of influence with one dominant value set
- Search for superordinate goal that all parties share

#### **STRUCTURAL conflicts are caused by:**

- Destructive patterns of behavior or interaction
- Unequal control, ownership, or distribution of resources
- Geographic, physical, or environmental factors that hinder cooperation
- Time constraints

#### **Possible STRUCTURAL interventions:**

- Clarify, define, and change roles
- Replace destructive behavior patterns
- Reallocate ownership or control of resources
- Establish a fair and mutually acceptable decision-making process
- Change negotiating process from positional to interest-based bargaining
- Modify means of influence used by parties (less coercion, more persuasion)
- Change physical and environmental relationships of parties (closeness and distance)
- Modify external pressures on parties
- Change time constraints

Adapted by Thomas Fiutak from Christopher Moore's *The Mediation Process: Practical Strategies for Resolving Conflict*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, 1986.



# Reflection Worksheet—Group Conflict

Instructions: Individuals complete this quietly for a few minutes. Then, they discuss their reflections with one or two others in the group. In the large group, discuss responses to question four.

1. Recall a group in which you were a member or a facilitator in which conflict was apparent. Describe what was happening in the group. What were your feelings in the role you had (member or facilitator)?
2. What strategies did the facilitator use to deal with the group conflict?
3. With 20/20 hindsight, what strategies would you recommend the facilitator use to deal with the group conflict?
4. What did you learn from the situation that you would like to share with others?





## Handling Common Problems

Because so many different types of people interact in groups, problems are inevitable. These difficulties prompt virtually every author who writes about facilitation to include a section on dealing with problem people or situations. According to Justice and Jamieson, in *The Complete Guide to Facilitation*, the overabundance of such writing gave us pause for thought when it came to covering the topic in our book. We also considered that, based on our experience, 98 percent of all the problems anticipated by beginning facilitators simply don't happen if the group sessions have been carefully designed and planned. In fact, one of the most important messages we can convey about such problems is this:

***You handle the vast majority of potential group problems through careful design and planning, before the group ever convenes—not during the session by using an arsenal of tricks.***

Having delivered that message, we must also acknowledge that even the most skilled facilitator will face some problems with certain group members or with unpredictably difficult situations. This guide identifies 20 of the most common problems that must be dealt with. Some difficult situations involve the group, while others involve inappropriate or unhelpful individual behaviors. We have described each common facilitator actions for dealing with the challenge.

### Difficult Group Situations

1. **Group energy, interest, or attention wanes.** There are many reasons why a group might start to lose energy, including fatigue, the time of day, environmental conditions (heating, background noise), the content becoming less interesting or relevant for the whole group, individual members going off on a tangent, or unsurfaced differences that distract participants from the present conversation. The key manifestations of this situation are:
  - Low participation
  - Slow participation and pace; sluggishness
  - Less feeling, passion, or energy in conversation; flat
  - Nonverbal cues, including physical withdrawal, lying back in seat, turning away, staring off, or focusing outside the group.

When you are confronted with this type of situation, try one or more of these options:

- a. Ask the group what is going on.
  - b. Provide descriptive feedback on what you see; ask why.
  - c. Increase your own energy, animation, pace; alter voice tone/inflection.
  - d. Take a short break.
  - e. Ask the group if this (what is being discussed at the time) is working, helpful, and on track.
  - f. Ask the group what it would like to do.
  - g. Have the group do something physical (walk, stretch, etc).
2. **The group is unresponsive.** Sometimes a particular activity or task seems to fall flat; members respond with only silence, a few superficial statements, or some form of questioning or whining about having to do the activity.



There could be many reasons for such a situation, ranging from poor placement of the activity in the agenda sequence or a design that seems inappropriate, confusing, or too complicated, to resistance related to where the task is leading (e.g., sensitivity of a subject, political vulnerability, fear or retribution).

In these situations, it is often helpful to try one or more of the following:

- a. Ask the group what is going on.
- b. Provide descriptive feedback on what you see; ask why.
- c. Try a different way to start the activity or discussion.
- d. Take a short break; ask a few individuals why they're silent or do not seem to want to do the activity.
- e. Ask the group if what has been proposed is needed, or helpful, or not possible right now.
- f. Ask members if they have any suggestions as to how to do it differently.
- g. Ask the group what it would like to do.
- h. Ask individuals to respond.

3. **The group keeps going off the agenda.** Some groups seem to have trouble staying on the subject or following the agenda. They may just lack discipline, or they may be thinking of other agendas (personal) or disagree with the agenda, or for some reason want to avoid the task.

When this group behavior occurs, try one or more of these options:

- a. Refer people back to, and re-orient them to, the agenda.
- b. Ask members if they feel the current discussion is helpful or necessary.
- c. Point out the behavior and ask why the group is going off the agenda.
- d. Offer to change or re-order the agenda.
- e. Ask if the current conversation is important to everyone or if it can be postponed until after the meeting and then handled by a few members of the group.
- f. Ask the group what is going on.
- g. Take a break. Start back on the agenda after the break.

4. **Only part of the group participates.** Many factors can contribute to this problem, such as:

- The topic of discussion may be relevant only to some members.
- The group composition may be wrong.
- The participants may be intimidating each other.
- Political barriers may be keeping some members from expressing themselves (e.g., hierarchy, unpopular differences).
- The quiet ones are "checked out."
- The quiet ones are attentive and processing what they are hearing.

In these kinds of situations, it can be useful for the facilitator to:

- a. Ask if others have information or opinions to share.
- b. Structure the discussion so that everyone gets to talk.
- c. Ask if the quiet ones feel connected to the discussion.
- d. Point out that only some people are contributing, and ask why.
- e. During a break, ask quiet members why they are not participating.
- f. Ask if the current conversation is important to everyone or if it can be postponed until after the meeting and then handled by a few members of the group.



5. **The group is getting highly emotional.** Sometimes group discussions get heated or highly sensitive. Emotions such as anger, hurt, or fear are openly expressed. Voices get louder. Tension and nervousness increase. Even tears appear. When a group gets emotional, it's not necessarily a bad thing. It can just be part of someone's passion, ownership, or commitment to specific ideas or views. It could also be part of healthy debate that is highly relevant to the task. On the other hand, it can become destructive when the emotional expression is personally hurtful, personality-based, or exceeds the bounds of the group and its work.

When a highly emotional state emerges, it is often helpful to try these options:

- a. Let it go. Watch how the group handles it. Determine if it is task-related and relevant to the group's progress.
- b. Take a break. Ask everyone to relax and come back with some input.
- c. If you see people acting uncomfortable, ask why.
- d. If just a few are emotional, see if the discussion can be held privately or whether or not it's really important for all to hear.
- e. If the conflict is escalating and not moving toward a natural resolution, intervene with a conflict resolution technique.

### Difficult Individual Behaviors

Invariably, there will be people in the group who cause problems through inappropriate or unhelpful behaviors. While each situation is unique, there are some general guidelines to follow when dealing with such individuals in the group setting.

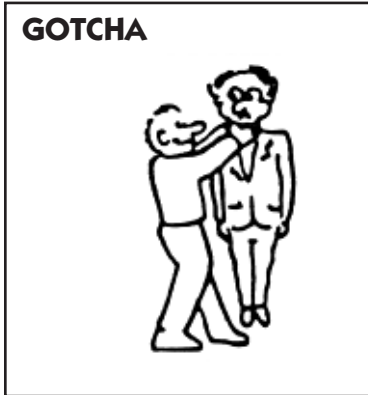
1. When possible, talk to them privately to point out the problem and coach them toward more desirable behaviors. Approach as a friend and ally, not as an authority figure.
2. Focus on a specific desired behavior.
3. Don't judge a person's behavior as right or wrong.
4. Try to maintain the balance between protecting the group from the distracting behavior and protecting the individual from undue attack.
5. Accept what they're doing. Describe it. Ask about it.
6. Legitimize their feelings, perceptions, or rights.
7. Work with their issues when it will be productive for the group, or defer the issues to a time when the group is likely to perform well, despite the distraction.
8. Be sure to have ground rules and norms for participation, so that the group can self-monitor. Refer to the group for enforcement when someone is out of line.

In addition to the general guidelines, there are other specific actions you can take when a problem behavior pops up. Some of the more common behaviors and possible responses follow.



# Problem Meeting Behaviors

## GOTCHA



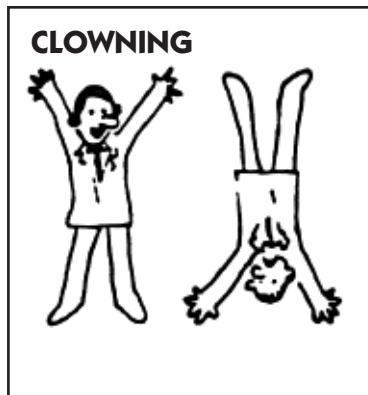
### WHAT

- Cuts off others who are speaking
- Jumps into a conversation too soon
- May be verbal or use highly distracting non-verbal expressions

### WHAT TO DO

- Enforce the related ground rule.
- Stop the interrupter and ask him or her to wait while the group allows the speaker to finish his or her thought.
- Ask people who feel impatient to write down their thoughts rather than blurt them out.
- In larger groups, as people raise their hands, say "We'll hear first from (member's name), then (member's name), then (member's name), and so on. Make sure you follow through on having people speak in sequence.

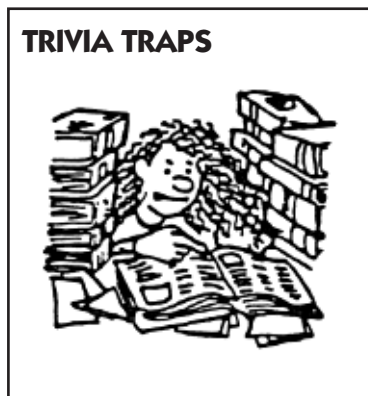
## CLOWNING



- Person may overuse humor, act silly, or joke about everything
- Attention-getting behaviors are regular
- Humorous behaviors may infuse the group with energy, or they may distract the group

- Ask the person to stop the behavior.
- Describe what is going on and point out its distracting quality.
- Talk to the person privately, after the meeting or during a break.
- If the person has readily disrupted the meeting, take a break. Talk to him or her. Come back with a structure and focus on the agenda.

## TRIVIA TRAPS



- May suffer from analysis paralysis
- May be overly compulsive

- Bring back to agenda.
- Suggest person work on that item after meeting.



# Problem Meeting Behaviors

### FILA-BUSTER



#### WHAT

- Repeats the same point over and over
- Gets caught up in something so sounds like a "broken record"
- May insert personal agendas

#### WHAT TO DO

- Acknowledge the importance of the point and the person's passion, advocacy, or determination.
- Demonstrate that he or she has been heard and the point recorded.
- Explain how and when the point will be dealt with.
- Ask directly if the person can "let go of it for now."
- Provide a final time-limited opportunity to make the point.

### AGENDA GRABBER



- Talks off the subject
- Out of sync with the agenda and talks regularly about things that are irrelevant to the group's task
- Is out of sequence with the agenda

- Ask them to relate what they are saying to the current agenda.
- Ask if the group can come back to their point and record it on a "parking lot" sheet.
- Ask if others have anything to add to what the person said.
- Stop them. Tell them it's not appropriate now. Bring it up later under a different part of the agenda.

### SUPERSTAR



- May think he/she is a super-star and may be expressing through hostility
- May feel ignored
- May be influential in the group (most authority) and abuses rather than uses it by "taking shots" at others.

- Boomerang comment back to group: "What do the rest of you think?"
- Call the shot, "That one was loaded, anyone care to take a crack at it?"
- Restate the statement/question in neutral way, fish for content behind the statement: "Is what you are trying to say . . . ?"
- Use humor (if you've still got your cool).



# Problem Meeting Behaviors

## SIDE CONVERSATIONS



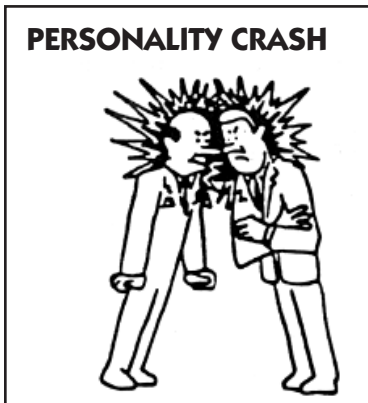
### WHAT

- Makes private comments to another person
- Carries on another meeting with their neighbor

### WHAT TO DO

- Invite them to share what is being said.
- Stop the conversation, be quiet, and look at the people talking.
- Ask them to stop.
- Move closer to the people having the side conversation.
- Say, "Let's have one conversation."
- Point out that the whispering or talking is distracting.

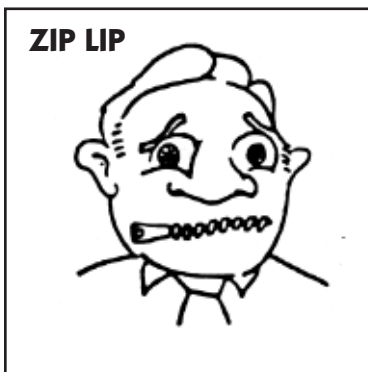
## PERSONALITY CRASH



- Attacks, criticizes, or picks an argument with other members or the facilitator
- Attempts to discredit someone
- Tries to change what the group is doing by focusing on individual behavior

- Describe, nonjudgmentally, what the person is doing.
- Ask if the criticism is based on something that has occurred in the meeting.
- Stop any argument. Ask for and record a statement of each position. Engage other group members in discussing their positions.
- Ask the person what the group could do to respond to his or her concern.

## ZIP LIP



- Remains silent in the meeting
- Seems unable or unwilling to speak up
- May be timid, fearful of something, or unsure of themselves and what they have to offer
- Sometimes drops out, withdraws, or works on something else

- Talk to them privately at another time.
- Call on them by name.
- Thank them when they do contribute.
- Turn to them when the agenda moves to an area that you know they can address with confidence, conviction, or expertise.
- Early in key conversations, have everyone respond briefly to a specific question.

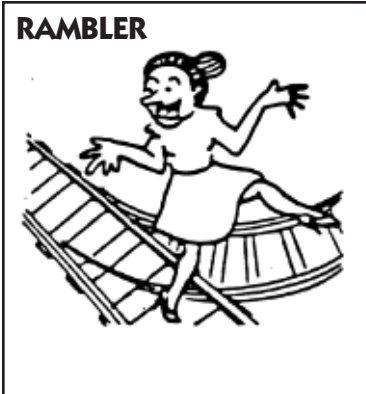


# Problem Meeting Behaviors

### WHAT

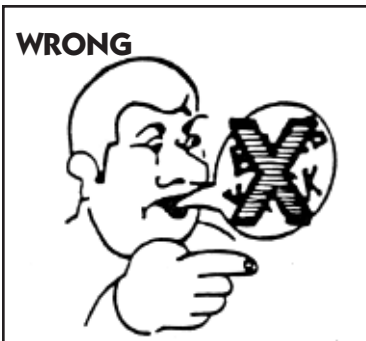
### WHAT TO DO

#### RAMBLER



- Inserts personal agendas
- Continually inserts a concern, a disagreement, or an alternative or additional agenda item
- Repetition of a statement may become annoying and distracts from the group task
- Ask the person how what he or she is saying relates to the current agenda item.
- Record the point, thank the person, and move on.
- Ask the person what he or she wants the group to do with the input.
- Give the person a time limit.

#### WRONG



- Member incorrectly states the facts
- Confront delicately: "That is one way of looking at it, but according to . . ."
- Say, "I see your point, but we need to reconcile that with (fact)."

#### DOMINATOR



- Talks too often
- Talks too long
- Talks very loud
- Makes it difficult for others to participate
- Stop the person, thank him or her, and say you'd like to hear from someone else.
- Call attention to the agenda and time frames.
- Break eye contact.
- Move closer to the person, getting in front of him/her.
- Introduce an inclusion activity to get everyone talking.



# Problem Meeting Behaviors

### WHAT

### WHAT TO DO

#### BUSY BODY



- Repeatedly arrives late or leaves early
- Frequently ducks in and out of meetings
- Misses meetings

- Ask members to announce if, when, and why they have to leave, come late, or miss a meeting.
- Suggest a ground rule: members agree to support decisions made in their absence.
- Ask one of the group members to update someone on a break instead of reviewing during the meeting.
- Set a standard of attendance and find a replacement for those who do not come to meetings regularly.

#### SKEPTIC



- Constantly says, "That will never work"
- Nothing is OK with them
- Negative expressions may be verbal or non-verbal

- Paraphrase their view and stick very close to their original wording.
- Ask if there is any part of the work that they feel good about.
- Ask for their opinion about what is needed, record the opinion, and ask the group to respond.

#### SABOTEUR



- Does many of the above behaviors
- Persists even with gentle and forceful facilitator interventions

- Call a strategy meeting.
- Uninvite the person.
- Use the rest of the group to help discipline.

Adapted with permission from Tom Justice and David Jamiesen, *The Complete Guide to Facilitation*, 1998.





## 6. Dealing with Group Conflict

# Handling Common Problems

Instructions: In groups of three to four people, discuss what strategies you would use as a facilitator when facing the described common problem. For each common problem, have small group share their recommended strategies. Following the exercise, refer to the written text about handling common behaviors.

### Common Group Problem

### Recommended Strategies

Group energy, interest, or attention is waning.

The group keeps getting off the agenda.

Only part of the group participates.

An activity falls flat; the group is unresponsive.

The group is getting highly emotional.

Worksheet: Make copies for use at future meetings.



# Dealing with Challenging Behaviors

## Role Play

The goal of the facilitator is to make sure that the group is working effectively. Despite all the planning that you might do to prepare for facilitation, it is often very difficult to predict how the behavior of individual group members will impact the group. Role playing in the training is an effective way to illustrate different behaviors, and to generate discussion around how to effectively deal with different people in the group.

### Instructions

Review the case example on page 6.26. Select individuals to serve as the facilitator, group members, and observer(s). You can vary the assignments and the number of individuals in the group; however, more than eight people in a group makes it very difficult for the person playing the role of the facilitator. Ask for volunteers or make assignments ahead of time, possibly before a break or lunch. This will give people time to read the case study and think about their role.

Arrange the group in a circle and have the rest of the group around the outside of the circle observing what is happening. Allow the group to discuss the situation described in the case study for 5 to 10 minutes. Stop the role play and begin to debrief about what happened.

### Discussion Points

1. Ask the facilitator how he or she felt about the process.
2. Check with group members about their role and how they felt the facilitator and other group members responded to them.
3. Check in with the observer(s) to see what they observed about the behaviors and how group members dealt with behavior challenges from individuals in the group. Use this as a way to talk about ways to deal with different behaviors in a group.
4. Refer to the handouts on challenging behaviors from this volume.



Case Example:

# The County Feedlot Committee

Several weeks ago the chairman of the county board contacted you about facilitating a county feedlot advisory committee the board is in the process of appointing. He said they want a small group to meet over the next six months to develop recommendations to the board on the county's roles and responsibility with feedlots. The county planning director will staff the effort, set up meetings, do mailings, etc.

Yesterday you read in the paper the "small" group has grown to 30 people. While the county board's goal of bringing all affected parties to the table is admirable, you know enough of the names to know some of these folks just plain don't like each other. The potential for controversy definitely exists. The article also said a facilitator had agreed to work with the group, but it didn't name you.

This is a rural county with only one community over 20,000, but it does have, in addition to a daily newspaper, one television and two radio stations. All regularly report on feedlot controversies both locally and statewide. They will no doubt be covering and reporting on committee meetings. The chair of the county board and the planning director are meeting with you tomorrow. Using your contracting outline, discuss your strategies for this meeting knowing they will want a definite yes or no from you, and your recommendations on the process.

From this case study, these roles can be assigned:

- Facilitator
- Observer(s)
- Farmer 1 - Normal participant
- Farmer 2 - Silent type
- Izaak Walton League - Takes the group off the agenda
- Clean Water Coalition - Dominant
- Township Officer - Normal participant
- Resident in rural area who works in city - Confrontational
- County Commissioner - Comes late and goes in and out of the meeting
- Agricultural Educator - Has side conversations during the discussion



# Sample Role Play

Make a copy of this page for every observer in your group, and one extra copy. Cut apart the extra copy along the dotted lines and give to each member assigned a role other than observer.

Facilitator

Regular Group Participant

Silent

Takes the group off the agenda

Dominant

Confrontational

Comes late and goes in and out of the meeting

Has side conversations during the discussion

Worksheet: Make copies for use at future meetings.



## Finding More Resources

The educational and corporate community has dozens of marvelous resources available for the motivated facilitator wishing to find more resources. Also, the practical wisdom of gifted community facilitators should be tapped. This guidebook has drawn upon several excellent resources and those are listed in the following reference list.

In the search for more resources consider human resources, written resources, technology-enhanced resources, organizational resources, and other resources. Identify excellent facilitators and interview them. Practical wisdom is often not written but accessible through stories. Utilize libraries to search for materials. Search for organizations that support facilitator growth and learning, like the National Facilitators Network (has state-based groups, too). Contact your local Cooperative Extension Service for information and coaching.

Consider searching for resources under the general heading of facilitation as well as under each of the sub-topics important to facilitation (conflict, decision-making processes, etc.). Remember that the context in which facilitation is done is important—in board rooms, in community meeting rooms, in group retreat settings, etc. Evaluate the resource to see if it is more appropriate in one context than another.

Best wishes finding more resources to build upon your skills, understanding, and expertise as a facilitator.

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# Notes

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